

Remarks by Congresswoman Donna Christensen (USVI) to the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force

Fri Feb 28

Subject: Coral Reef

Good morning: Secretary Norton, governors of our Island paradises, members of the Coral Reef Taskforce, colleagues and friends.

Like me I am sure that most if not all of you, would prefer to be studying coral reefs in their natural habitats right now, rather than discussing them here in cold, snowy Washington, DC. And so I want to extend the warmest welcome I can muster.

Last night as I was thinking about what I would say, I remembered that some of the very first events I participated were the kickoff and others related to the year of the reef.

They were a natural for me coming from a place where the coral reefs and related issues are so important both to our way of living as well as making one.

Why didn't anyone warn me that these issues would be some of the most difficult I would have to deal with.

I am still smarting from the two town meetings I held last week and I still have the hardest one to do in Frenchtown, St Thomas, where fishing has been the culture and the livelihood for generations.

Nevertheless, I remain committed to the process of developing the general management plan, and I am heartened to hear the Secretary speak of her commitment to consultation, collaboration, and the other two C's.

I do believe that with this assurance that their concerns will be heard and given due consideration, and their being convinced of the science behind the restrictions, and the positive experiences of those who have gone down this road before, they will be supportive of the monuments. They too want to preserve the reefs and improve the resources.

The one remaining obstacle is the issue of ownership. Many of my constituents still feel that this has been a taking, and I anticipate that a court challenge might still come. It is important that this debate be put to rest.

We will need the support and assistance of all of the agencies and many of the organizations seated here today, but I do believe that in the end we will have a product that protects the reefs and sea life, that revitalizes and diversifies our fishing industry, that ensures in so far as it is possible that no one who depended on this area to provide for their families would suffer severe economic harm, and that will enhance our tourism product - a win win for all, and for the long term.

We also need your support for a comprehensive approach to saving our reefs. Those who fish for a living or recreation are not the only destroyer. They are feeling particularly

targeted. And so we must also address non point source pollution and leaking sewage systems more effectively.

As a matter of fact I have a message from a fisherman in St. Croix, that since we are all so smart he wants us to fix the storm and hurricane problem too.

Now if you can't do that I ask for your support for two alternatives for starters: to make the Coral Reef research lab a reality. That would be a good substitute.

We announced the program and consortium to be involved three or more years ago. Today the Park Service is prepared to provide the site. The Universities are ready, and we are ready to work on at least the seed funding.

The other is a transfer of land to the people of St. John for a school, which is something that has been talked about for years. We just need to make it finally happen. It is not a reef issue, but trust me it is very much connected.

So if I have learned nothing else in the past 6 years is that doing what must be done to protect our world reefs is by no means easy. And so I have a deep respect for all who are gathered here to pursue this goal. And I came. Here to applaud and thank you for your very important efforts.

I look forward to continuing to work with you in our roles as stewards of precious resources, God put us here to take care of.